

Historico – Cultural Analysis of Gendered Power - Play in Society as Portrayed in Nadeem Aslam’s Novels

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Abstract

This paper discusses an important aspect of human society, the gendered use of power on women and its portrayal through the literary texts of Nadeem Aslam. Literature mirrors human society through fictional characters and imaginary situations. A co-relation between gendered power, in the historical and contemporary social context and resultant discrimination through oppression and patriarchal hegemonic structures on women is therein established. Themes of female oppression and exploitation, othering and gendered discriminative power dynamics are the basis of this study. Gendered power through its trajectories is the basis of problems faced by women in androcentric societies, creating situational conflicts at the macro and micro level. The resultant feminist concerns give significance to this study as they give rise to pertinent issues, which need to be addressed in human society.

Key Words:

Androcentric, Gender discrimination, Othering, oppression, Power, Trajectories.

Introduction

The objective of this research is to explore through the episteme of feminism the exploitation of women through gendered use of force and power in culturally retrogressive, socially oppressive societies, with hegemonic power structures that go back to the colonial historical background. The silencing and displacement of women result in mental, physical and emotional disturbance. It refers to gendered use of authority in societies, which still adhere to androcentric, patriarchal norms. As pointed out by Dahl “the most important social phenomenon is power, which can be described as an occurrence, which exists in relation to people as authority” (Dahl, 1956). All power apparatuses are gender operated, the women becoming victims of oppression and subjugation as presented by Aslam in the referred texts. Aslam is a chronicler of socio-cultural structures of society. He bases his novels on the historical and geographical context of his characters, dealing with contemporary issues, which plague societies.

Significance of Study

The research is significant as all Nadeem Aslam’s novels encompass themes pertaining to feminist concerns emerging in human societies in the contemporary times, an aspect hitherto unexplored from this perspective. Strinati considers subjugation and control of women in human societies as a radical method of social discrimination. It considers patriarchy; the subjugation and control of women as an extreme method of division and discrimination socially in contemporary societies, but which he points out have deep-seated roots in history and culture. (Strinati, 1995)

Mohanty who forms the theoretical framework for this research in her *Feminism Without Borders* talks on the formulation of feminist concerns in the context of postcolonial feminism with reference to the third world. She explains that feminist concerns should not be taken only as gender based, culture, history and geography is also important in the formulation of feminist concerns (Mohanty, 2003). The significant factor is the postcolonial context of South Asia. Ideological conflicts, political strife, partition, resultant migration and wars have left their mark on women. They are physical, emotional and social victims of power not only in our native postcolonial society, but also as immigrant Diaspora in the west too, especially in the UK as portrayed by Aslam in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. (Aslam, 2004) Women are the victims of gendered power, with discrimination and infliction of suffering through patriarchal, hegemonic social power structures as depicted in *Season of the Rainbirds* (Aslam, 1993) and *The Wasted Vigil* too (Aslam, 2008). Gendered use of force and power in Afghanistan is a consequence of political and social reasons in the South Asian region as portrayed by Aslam. Extremist actions in the use of power are gendered

and a repercussion of the war and strife inside Afghanistan. Women did not only have to face silencing and oppression by the extremist fundamentalist, they had to undergo displacement, de-territorialization, victimization, exclusion and persecution through discriminative gendered power operatives in the Afghan social context of *The Wasted Vigil*. Uma Narayan's viewpoint is that feminist perspectives are formulated through gender roles in the society, as well as within families. This postcolonial theorist has added a new dimension to the gender power play by explaining how the subjugative positioning of women in society is done through male dominance and authority in the South Asian region, and especially the subcontinent. (Narayan, 2000)

Societies suffer when wars are inflicted on them due to various reasons. As Fluri observes "Men's and women's experiences of violence during military conflicts are often shaped by gender and intersected by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, location or dislocation" (Fluri, 2008). Thus, the Soviet assertion justifying their invasion in 1979 by the deceptive avowal of saving Afghan women from the hegemonic, patriarchal structure of society, and excesses committed on women, again was ironically reversed as they themselves let loose upon the Afghan women a reign of fear and terror. The Afghan social order was devastated, and Afghan women became victims of atrocities hitherto unknown. They were defiled, persecuted and abused by the Soviet army. This is how a society plunged into the darkest of eras, beginning a reign of terror and trauma.

Aims and Objectives

The objective of this research is to analyze the role of gender and the exercise of male gendered power in female lives in human societies especially in the context of the sub-continent and south Asian region. The basis of study in this paper being representative texts by Nadeem Aslam, form apt source of information about human society as they mirror lives of humans, especially women in their rendering through the historical and social contexts. The phenomenon of gendered power is explicitly portrayed in these novels, subscribing to the contention of male gender roles being more powerful, subjugative and hegemonic. As viewed through the global perspective, women are more vulnerable and affected by immigration, de-territorialization and displacement as well as in the native positioning if marginalized or discriminated. Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* points out that for women adjustments are difficult in the new social forms that come into existence, as their identities become questionable, being alien to the new social orders, thus making it difficult to integrate and assimilate (Brah, 1996). Thus, in all three analyzed novels, after being displaced from their original societies, women become victims of double displacement, unable to actualize themselves in alien surroundings as well as being denied identities and recognition. The reason being that human societies are averse to assimilation of people from outside their close circles. Thus, marginalization and othering also result, as for alien immigrants in *Maps*. For that matter, a metaphoric marginalization even occurs in native societies, which form barriers against assimilation through exclusion as in the case of Zebun in *Season*. Aslam reveals gendered significations of Power through these texts. In the patriarchal societies of the south Asian region women are treated as subjects of power, subjected to persecutorial domination as in *The Wasted Vigil*, as well as in other novels. This devastates the social lives of women, affecting them mentally, socially and physically creating psychosocial problems of existence and identity. Diasporic women in *Maps* face isolation and marginalization, as immigrants. Their native culture, religion and social practices continue to constrain their lives as curtailments in the liberal west.

An interesting case study is developed through this research paper regarding human rights challenges with reference to gendered use of power on women through the feminist perspective. It challenges the perpetration of force and power over women through macho gendered forces, irrespective of their nationality, be it Pakistani or Afghan. The common grounds of humanity, culture and religion bind them in one bond. Ethnic marginalization and social ostracism as of Elizabeth and Zebun in *Rainbirds* is against decent social norms, and perpetrated by feudal, patriarchal, hegemonic gendered power. Honour killing in *Maps* is the worst kind of social persecution, and execution of patriarchal hegemony, which is against humanist values and norms in cultured societies. This heinous crime as depicted in *Maps* is committed in Britain, in a Muslim household, based on true incidences of honour killings enacted in the liberal British society by retrogressive humans.

As Barlas points out patriarchy is a "politics of sexual differentiation" (Barlas, 2002) Cultural impositions, ethnic ostracization and persecution through social exclusion are a result of the politics of sexual discrimination, based on gendered power play in societies. Women are silenced to Voicelessness by social and cultural power apparatuses in societies like ours. In the *Season*, case study reveals Elizabeth Massih as a victim of this indiscriminate use of power and force, victimized through ethnic ostracism, social marginalization and segregation in a culturally biased society. She becomes a displaced entity, as ethnically she is an outcast "chodhi" (Season, p.39).

It is pertinent that geographical, regional, historical and socio-cultural practices impact female lives. Even in native social set ups ethnic norms and social biases impact female lives. The residents of poor, segregated dwellings on the outskirts of society live a subhuman existence. Elizabeth Massih a persecuted female character in *Season*

lives on the periphery of the society, physically and metaphorically. She is disdained for being a daughter of a poor Christian sewer cleaner, ostracized in her own native society. Her position as DC Azhar's mistress is thus more so open to ridicule. Mujeeb Ali, the feudal, patriarchal keeper of morals, pushes through the entrance of the house without invitation (Season, p.103). His "colossus form" overshadows her "slender form"; looking at her censoriously, examining her from "head to toe" unashamedly. In a scornful manner he questions, "Are you the maid?" peremptorily answering himself in a ridiculing way, "Of course you aren't." He expects a show of respect by virtue of his being an overlord in a feudal society by demanding, "Don't you have a stole," explicating the social and cultural practice of wearing something to cover the head in the presence of a person of authority in gendered authoritarian society. (Season, p.104) The punishment Elizabeth faces is extremely cruel, for she is dragged and mauled in the streets by a sanctimonious crowd roused to frenzy by the town cleric, for living in sin with the DC. He very conveniently escapes accountability being in a powerful position in the society. Social opinion and persecutive frenzy are all interestingly roused by gendered actions in societies, the depiction of the above incident by Aslam an example.

Cultural censure and social taboos are also engineered by gendered dominant thought in the society. Zebun who suffers exclusion, and social ostracism is an ex prostitute. Abandoned by her prospective husband, she is a victim of social taboos and negative public opinion formulated by men of the society. She is stigmatized; she hankers for respectability and humane treatment, which is denied even by the town clergyman, who is the keeper of social morals.

Mohanty who propounds her feminist vision of happiness explains it as a world in which women and men have the freedom of choice in their loves and lives. They should be free to choose their life partner and whom they would like to set their house with, a life where not drudgery and duty but pleasure and creativity reign. A life where there is freedom for imaginative exploration. (ibid. 2003, p.3)

A writer of literature is a true representative, bringing out follies and foibles that riddle a society, just as he aesthetically exposes the painful sores that bleed in societies, sometimes imperceptibly and at others glaringly. Aslam's genius in exploring those hidden aspects of society is un-paralleled. *The Wasted Vigil* is an expression of personal observation exposing the excruciating persecution perpetrated on women during the Afghan war era. Women were subjected to torture by the macho religio-political extremist forces. They became abject targets of the use of excessive power, being considered by the Taliban as unholy symbols of evil and sin. According to amnesty International report (ibid., 2003) "If a woman went to the market and showed an inch of flesh during the Taliban era she would have been raped or flogged." A very painful pathetic representation by Aslam is of the female characters in *The Wasted Vigil*. Qatrina a victim of the gendered violence and torture, suffered not only physical displacement but ultimate mental and emotional derangement too, during the strife in the South Asian region of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

"She had to wear the burka while they were killing her. Afterwards while she lay on the ground, a man had gathered the hem of the burka and tied it into a knot and dragged her away as he would a bundle, and he grinned at his own ingenuity the while, as did the spectators. Blood was draining steadily out of the embroidered eye grille" (Vigil, p.135).

This research involves a comparative study of three different societies, to unveil how gender actions try to contrive power niches for themselves. The gendered politics of power succeed in building hegemonic power structures. Feminine oppression, subjugation, execution and persecution are depicted as a norm in societies portrayed in the texts. These human societies instead of progressing towards humanism, liberalism and enlightenment follow retrogression, in the name of culture, social taboos and religious misinterpretations. Thus Qatrina, Zameen and Dunya in *The Vigil*, are all victims of hegemonic power, exercised through extremist macho forces, first through infiltrators from outside, then the jihadist who sided with the US forces posing as saviors and subsequently native Taliban. Similarly, *Season*, and *Maps* mirroring real life situations are apt case studies of cultural and religious impositions, both becoming exploitative gendered power phenomena's wielding uncivilized trajectories of hegemonic control and force over women. In the *Maps*, set in the liberal UK, encompassing lives of immigrant Pakistanis, subjugative practices curb female identity.

To quote Mohanty with reference to gender and feminist concerns, "being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our economic and social marginality or/privilege. It would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and supposedly justified violence against women"(Mohanty,1991). It is evident from the study of *Maps* that even in the multicultural society of Britain, the immigrant Pakistanis and South Asians continue to be governed by sexism and orthodox practices, subjecting women to retrogressive oppressive practices like forced marriages and submission to patriarchal will, honor killings and exorcism. Thus, female characters in *Maps* are victimized by gendered hegemonic practices, as diaspora.

Diaspora women are singularly affected through the gendered choice to immigrate. For females, displacement poses problems of assimilation and integration into alien societies. These semi-educated women in those initial years of immigration as portrayed in *Maps* face disillusionment and maladjustment. They belonged to societies that followed hierarchical/patriarchal structures; male dominance and hegemony were accepted as normal there. Gendered patterns were executed by the immigrant males who themselves belonged from low working classes. They could not open up to the liberalism of the western social structures as depicted by Aslam in *Maps*, continuing with the colonial social practices of male as authority. A study conducted by Emily Dyer reveals that honor killings is on the rise in the UK, with the police reporting at least 12 such incidences in 2002. This belies the cult of civilized culture in the progressive west. Unfortunately, most of these incidences occurred among Muslim Pakistani immigrants. This was roughly the time when Aslam was writing his *Maps* and was deeply affected by such horrifying news on the media. Unfortunately, instead of such incidences decreasing in the civilized Britain, there has been a marked rise in killing for honor incidences in the subsequent five years, as reported in the media which shows the British society is also affected by the retrogressive Muslim immigrants, who take with them their cultural practices. (Dyer, 2015)

An analysis of social norms with reference to gender and female positioning would be appropriate. Mohanty explicates the positioning of women in the historical perspective of the south Asian region; she says, "Colonization without exception implies a relationship of structural domination and a suppression which is often violent" (Mohanty, 2003). Women have been subjects of authority and power historically. In postcolonial societies, the colonized male replaced the white male in the position of power. The Voicelessness induced on the native male by the colonizers is replaced by the assuming of power and authority by native males. The practice of induced silence, of the native male is passed down to women in the postcolonial era. Thus, the suppressed male hood found vent through intensification of the same colonial subjugative practices at home over women, intensifying gendered authority and patriarchal hegemony.

Loomba purports "they seized upon the home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be all westernised but the domestic sphere retained its cultural purity" (Loomba, 1998). Thus, this subjugative oppression of women is a legacy from the time of the colonizers, inducing in them fragmentation and denial of assertion of identity at all levels. The ruling process of the colonizers was facilitated by the creation of sexually sequestered, radically retrogressive class systems, enabling them to keep control (Mohanty, 2003, p.61). Thus, too were 'hegemonic masculinities patronized,' continuing with the argument Mohanty explains that they replicated state rule, providing an opportunity to existing patriarchies in the society to further strengthen class/caste based hierarchies, which continue to dominate contemporary societies.

Fanon voices his views that colonized men became subjects, but to take the analogy further, women became split subjects under patriarchal hegemony in postcolonial societies (Fanon, 1967). Women like the colonized men, are conscious of being a subject of gaze by men. Loomba in her discourse about colonialism explains, "The ideology and practices of male domination are historically, geographically and culturally variable" (Loomba, 1998). Women's lives are vulnerable to cultural and historical practices, which are a product of the geographical and socio-cultural norms. Thus, women in different societies have different narratives of gendered power and discrimination. Mohanty very succinctly points out that, "The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological and anthropological universals--but on the historically specific material reality of groups of women" (Mohanty, 1986). With reference to gender and human society as represented in the texts, the south Asian women seem to be hegemonized into Voicelessness. The physically displaced immigrant women and metaphorically displaced women in native societies, continue to be subjects of power. The macho gender roles assumed by men continue to control and subjugate, imposing on women social and cultural imperatives, economic constraints and restraints through taboos creating double diaspora and oppression.

A gendered perception is that multiculturalism and feminism are posited as oppositional where human societies are prone to androcentric practices. Androcentric modes of culture victimize women. The very essence of equality, respect and regard and tolerant coexistence are negated under the umbrella of multiculturalism. (Whelehan, 2004). The problems of negating respectful co-existence to women in human society is attributed to gender biased family practices and unequal social structures of society, which deny empowerment to women in the private and public lives as compared to men. (Okin, 1994) Women are silenced and denied a voice, even in the households where they are married into, being treated as outsiders. The immigrant women are doubly silenced because of the language barrier. Situated on the peripheries of the western world constrained in their own households like *Kaukab*, the supercilious males deny women exposure to the outside world of the west. Hook attributes this as "a profound destabilization of subjectivity experienced as women" (Hook, 2005).

The context of the selected texts represents human society in the postcolonial third world social structures. Women are invariably the non-visible entities, the other half of the colonized male subject in the colonial speech. It was a world fraught with diverse imperatives of ideologies, social and political conflicts and religious imperatives.

Women were the most non-affective part of the colonial society denied an affective role or voice. Consequently in contemporary times, a woman's struggle for self-realization in the society is barred. Religion, culture, tradition and social taboos, thwart the assertion of her identity.

Exploring the theme of human society and gender power play, the positioning of women in the related societies is as subjects of patriarchal, gender, and social hegemony. The victimized women, in the analyzed texts are subjects of subjugative gender power. It assumes diverse trajectories. A perverse way of exercising masculinity in androcentric societies is egoism in relations with women. Misogynist males believe being overbearing, hostile and domineering to women reflects male power. Hostility instead of compassion symbolizes gender power. In *Maps*, Mahjabin's husband who resorts to sticking pins into her to torture her is an example of such misogynist males; just as the judge imposing on his wife Asghari represents brute force. Leaving a negative impact on female lives they subscribe to the view expressed by Talbot that, "violence in public spheres has entered the private lives too. (Talbot, 2007).

Diaspora immigrants struggle to gain normal existence in their marginalized lives, spurned as aliens and under pressure from their own retrogressive community. Gendered power becomes frustrated outbursts, vented out on women. Chanda's brothers unable to bear insults and scorns, by their own censorious male community resort to murdering their sister and her paramour in cold blood, as an assertion of their gendered ego and self-respect in *Maps*. They had to save their honor, murder becoming imperative. (Maps, p.176) Retrogressive societies force women to internalize an inferiority complex, which can also be called a universal experience of suppressive male culture. Kaukab in *Maps* has to experience this demeaning behavior from her husband and son Ujala, thus rousing a churning hatred and resentment towards the incomprehensible world of the males around her, which becomes oppressive and unbearable. It is candidly observed by Hooks "there are divisions created among women, which are based on religion, race, nationality, sexual orientation and culture, all cults propounded by men" (Hooks, 1981).

In the human society, for women the route to self-realization and attainment of the self is intertwined with the understanding of those forces which are diverse and based on cultural and economic factors, as profoundly stated by Spivak. It entails re-negotiation and understanding for development, for shaping and limiting their life experiences through their particular contexts. (Spivak, 1988)

For contemporary political societies in the west, according to Larking the most urgent psychological and social challenge is accepting ethno religious diversities to cope with deep-rooted differences that exist in democratically liberal cultures, which are highly permeable. (Larking, 1998)

It is explored how women in this pervious situation of liberal democratic cultures, face challenges of patriarchal subjugation? Being subjects of gendered power Diasporic women face problems of social integration, adjustment and assimilation in the multicultural society. This is a recurrent problem according to Vertovec, who feels that the previous models of multiculturalism have become obsolete, 'leading to a demise of the welfare state and the failure of public services', thereby adversely affecting the positioning of women (Vertovec, 2009). With emergence of new social forms, have come into existence extremist misogynist, who create uncountable problems for the females in societies. Already displaced through immigration, they are further alienated by male decrees to adhere strictly to their ethnic and national differences, based on culture and ideologies. Karla very pertinently points out that these differences "have shifted to religious and cultural differences from national identification" (Karla, 2009). Muslim women especially are victims of this new scenario as gender authority forbids them to stay away from the western cults of individualism, liberalism and assertion of identity. Thus, they suffer subjugative silencing similar to that in their native homeland. This has further strengthened gender hegemonic practices as all embargoes are imposed under the cover of religion.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze socio-cultural structures of the society with reference to the positioning of gender and feminist concerns in the geo-historical perspective presented by Nadeem Aslam's novels. It presents a broader view of the socio-cultural set up of the society, portraying how gender roles govern social behavior and practices. It is particularly concerned with issues faced by women who are subjected to male gendered power in societies. It also enhances the global perspective of socio-cultural norms of the reader with reference to Nadeem Aslam's novels.

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